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AUTHOR Page, Michael S.

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ABSTRACT

To investigate the interactional behaviors of minorities when placed in a mostly white educational setting, this study focused on examining the meaning held by particular students in regard to acceptance, inclusion, and invitation into a larger group, in this case, the seventh grade at a university laboratory school in Louisiana. Of the 28 students, five were judged to be minorities. Participant observations, unstructured interviews, member checks, key informants, survey responses, and photography were employed to gather the needed data. Analysis of the data indicated that the minority students appeared to maintain a certain "distance" from their white peers, with a few exceptions. This is not to say that the minority students "initiated" this process, or that they "prefer this distance." There are several indications that the minorities themselves have attempted to integrate with their white classmates. There was no tendency on the part of the white students to invite a minority student into a white social setting, nor was there an instance of "blooming friendships" between students of separate races. Follow-up research needs to examine consider cross-grade factors and the teacher's role in race-related inclusion. (BT)

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Outsiders on the Inside: The Cultural Acceptance of Minorities in a Mostly White Classroom

A Qualitative Study

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Michael S. Page
Louisiana Tech University

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Introduction

The qualitative study contained herein was completed as part of the requirements for a doctoral-level course at a Louisiana University. The effort also resulted from this researcher's interest in the interactional behaviors of minorities when placed in a mostly white educational setting. As will be seen, these behaviors varied according to setting, time of day, and social circumstance; they occurred, however, in what may be seen as a "semi-consistent" manner. Prior to entering the setting, this researcher's prior experience in mixed-race environments resulted in a view that "the minority always feels excluded." That is, when placed in a minority role, the minority's meaning of a situation is drastically changed to one in which he or she feels "left out." The results of this research appear to confirm, at least in part, that these judgments are accurate. Exceptions appear to exist when length-of-time-in-the-setting variables are considered.

A university laboratory school was chosen as the site of this examination. Some might argue that this is an "atypical" K-8 school. Located on the campus of a Louisiana University, the school receives funds from tuition, from the State of Louisiana, and from the university itself. Approximately 250 students attend the school each year, with 19 teachers being employed to provide instruction. Approximately 17% of the students might be considered "minorities" (non-white), leading to this researcher's designation of the school as "mostly white." Each year, admission is granted to about one-half of the applicants who wish to enroll for the first time. Once admitted, the child is assured the opportunity to return the following year, until, of course, they complete the eighth grade. Special admittance is often granted to siblings of enrolled students, but no other "priorities" are recognized in admittance policy.

The school is unique in other ways as well. Each child attends physical education classes, music classes and art classes on a regular basis. Each teacher is afforded a spacious office that connects to the room in which they instruct, and classrooms are about

twice the size as most conventional classrooms. Cooperative learning is emphasized, with desks and chairs often arranged in groups. The school houses a media center, multipurpose room, gymnasium, fine arts area, resource room, computer lab and an extensive planetarium.

Review of Literature

Merten (1996) argues that in any cultural analysis, one must consider the meanings that are used by the cultural participants. These meanings, according to Merten, are used to shape and evaluate the peer's actions--as well as their own actions. The understanding of early adolescent rejection, therefore, is predicated on the researcher's emphasis on "emic categories."

Troyna and Hatcher (1992) report that racism is a pronounced feature of schools with majority-white populations, with racist comments and "name-calling" being the most obvious detectors. These authors also suggest that the "educator's stance" on the consequences of such racist actions is correlational to the overtness of subsequent occurrences. While overt instances of racism and racist behavior in the present study were not obvious in the scenario depicted by Troyna and Hatcher, it would be unusual for even a teacher to be apprised of such action. Seating choices, at least in these instances, appear to relate more to such racist behaviors.

Hatcher (1987) also reports that "all [interracial] kids" have "experienced racism in some form" by adolescence. The participants' meaning of the word, "racism" is not a purpose of this study, but discriminatory behaviors may be behind the number of survey responses that listed "because I am different" as motives for the exclusion of particular children. These "differences," it appears, can be overcome.

Methodology

Qualitative data were gathered from a seventh grade class of students at the school using an intrinsic focus. This researcher sought to examine the meaning held by particular students in regard to acceptance, inclusion, and invitation into the larger group. The study was narrowed quite early in the process to emphasize "minority acceptance by white students," and emerging themes were sought that would indicate inherent patterns of importance. Participant observations, unstructured interviews, member checks, key informants (Mrs. Jones was primary in this regard), survey responses and photography were employed to gather the needed data. Whenever possible, this researcher followed the seventh-grade class of students from one classroom to the next, although data was collected outdoors and during lunch as well.

Analysis

The seventh-grade class consisted of 28 students. Beginning in Mrs. Dixon's room each day for Mathematics and Science, the class then moved as a unit into Mrs. Nelson's room for English, Mrs. Jones' room for American History, back to Mrs. Nelson for Literature, then on to lunch, Physical Education, and either Spanish or Computer Literacy (the group split and attended the last two classes on alternate days). Observations (as well as the other data collection activities) were conducted in each of these environments, with the exception of Physical Education and Spanish. The collection and analysis of data were conducted over a 40-day period, which was broken by a two-week Christmas break.

Of the 28 seventh-grade students, five were deemed to be "minorities": Randy (an Iranian male), Jimmy (an Asian male), Holly (a West Indian female), Kesha (an African-American female), and Anthony (an African-American male). The remainder of the class consisted of 15 white females and 8 white males. As they moved from one class to another, each individual student was faced with *choices* as to the seating arrangement. As

stated above, cooperative learning and "group-work" were given great emphasis at the school, and each classroom was designed for these purposes. In two of the classrooms where students spent much of their day (Mrs. Nelson's room and Mrs. Jones' room) it was learned that seating arrangements were decided by *the students themselves*. In both of these locations, desks and chairs were structured in groups of two, with Mrs. Nelson's arrangement being "side-by-side" and Mrs. Jones' at 90-degree angles.

The seating situation quickly became an important component in this study, since seating choices would, in most instances, tend to indicate social preference. The "pairing" of students in each of the "choice" classrooms was closely observed, along with dialogue of minority students during class discussions and the sense of "comfortableness" each minority seemed to experience when sitting alongside different partners. As the "choice of partner" examination progressed, less emphasis (in regard to data collection) was placed on events and activities in Mrs. Dixon's room, where seats (in groups of four) were *assigned* on a rotating basis every three weeks. It should be noted, nevertheless, that at one point in the study an invitation given to the class to "go outside" by Mrs. Dixon provided rich, valuable data that has bearing on the conclusions reached in this study. It was during this instance that photography was best used to confirm the "meaning" a minority proscribed to his or her environment.

During the twel e "observation sessions" in the various locations throughout the school, there was only one occurrence when Holly and Kesha were observed in separate locations. The two girls, quite literally, "hung on each other." In almost any situation, given a choice, one would be joined with the other. There appeared to be no pattern in terms of "who sits first," as each of the females was joined by the other on different occasions. Never did the two girls sit in direct view of other students, choosing instead to sit as far to the rear as possible. In terms of outside socialization efforts, Kesha was the most aggressive, occasionally joining a group of white girls (see Appendix A, Photograph #3, although that occurrence should perhaps be examined in light of group dynamics

considerations). Holly, on the other hand, carefully avoided any interaction with males or females other than Kesha (See Appendix A, Photograph #5).

In regard to class discussion, Holly was virtually silent while Kesha often offered comments on various issues. Kesha became very involved, for example, during Mrs. Jones' discussion regarding slavery before the Civil War: "Slavery was hard to abolish overnight!" commented Mrs. Jones. "It takes time for these major issues to be resolved. Take the welfare problem. How long has it been going on? It lost it's purpose long ago, but its still hanging around!" In response, Kesha offered: "It's being abused because people are taking advantage of a system that at one time was very useful."

Holly was consistently observed as "shy," "being silent the entire period," and "one who took great strides to avoid interaction with anyone but her lone friend." In the interview conducted with Mrs. Jones, the teacher helped shed some light on Holly's seclusion and avoidance of most other children:

> I remember Holly when she was in the first...maybe it was second grade. Before that time, she had been an outgoing little girl. She was quite extroverted. But it was during that time--again, I think it was about the second grade--when her parents divorced. One parent was West Indian and the other was white. So they get divorced, and it really takes a toll on Holly. Poor thing, she lost a lot of hair after that. I'm not sure if and how it was related to the divorce, but all of the sudden all this hair starts coming out of her head. I mean...lots of it. She had a very noticeable bald spot on her head, and I know she was extremely embarrassed. Well, she started withdrawing from the other kids at that time. She's so sensitive. I'm sure she was really embarrassed. I think that her personality changed after that incident. She's been shy and withdrawn ever since then...

Mrs. Jones also observed that "Kesha, in my opinion, is much more open and personable than Holly." While there is one exception--one in which all of the minorities were

involved and where "pairing" was found to be atypical--the two girls appeared much more accepted by each other than any of their classmates.

The survey responses of the two female minorities are similar, but are expressed in different language. Holly, responding to the question "Explain how important it is for you to be a part of a 'group of friends' here at this school," stated "It's midways [sic] important to be with my friends." Kesha, when presented with the question "What are some of the things about your classmates that make you *not* want to be around them?" stated "Sometimes it is the way they act. There are some that are my friends but they think they are so much so [sic], we aren't as close as we were last year." In response to "Do you feel, overall, that you are *accepted* by your classmates? Why do you feel this way?" Kesha answered "...it's just sometimes me and another friend don't get along as well as others, they still are my friend [sic], we aren't close like I am with others."

Jimmy, the Asian male student, displayed the same withdrawal behaviors as Holly. He was perhaps the most interesting, if not the most depressing aspect of this entire process. The fieldnotes of this study abound with statements such as "Jimmy, unfortunately, was quiet during this class period," "Jimmy is observed as quiet and restrained," and "Jimmy sat alone in the NW corner of the room." As Mrs. Jones's statement regarding him stipulates, "...he gives off the impression as a loner--and I guess he is one." He, like Holly, appeared to gravitate toward the other minorities in social situations. While little data exist to suggest that the other minorities "leaned on" Jimmy, there were indications of leaning on the part of Jimmy towards the other minorities (see Appendix A, Photograph #7). Early in the study it was learned, via Mrs. Jones, that "Jimmy is new. He's only been here a few months." There were occasions when this student *attempted* assimilation in the larger group of children (see the "outside" description below, as well as Appendix A, Photograph #1), but he regularly sat next to or near other minorities during "choice" situations, including lunch.

Near the end of this study's data collection phase, Jimmy began to withdraw from all other children--including the minorities. Curiously, he began to sit alone in the classroom, mainly in Mrs. Nelson's class. Near the northwest corner of this room was a single desk, presumably for those who needed to complete make-up tests or other independent work. Jimmy attempted to make the location his "regular seat," which resulted in a mass of attention being directed toward him (see Appendix A, Photograph #6). After the first occurrence of that particular behavior, this researcher remarked:

> This looks very peculiar...that is, the fact that Jimmy is sitting alone when he could just as easily be sitting with the girl behind him. This raises further questions: Why is he acting this way? Could he be upset because of the aforementioned [in the fieldnotes] football game?

During another occurrence, it was noted that "Jimmy is sitting alone at the left side of the room. As usual, another desk adjoins his, but no one has occupied it." During this particular event, the researcher approached Mrs. Nelson with the question "Does Jimmy often sit alone like that?" "No, he doesn't," she replied. "That's curious." After a few minutes Mrs. Nelson called out to Jimmy: "Jimmy, who is that sitting next to you?" "Nobody," Jimmy responded quietly. "You sure someone isn't sitting there, and that they have just gone to the library?" Mrs. Nelson then asked. "No Maam," said Jimmy. Since Mrs. Nelson had obviously become concerned about Jimmy's solitairity, there appeared to be little doubt that socialization problems were underway. Once again, the football "game" that had occurred several days earlier became suspect for the withdrawal and seclusion of Jimmy.

This "game" was a result of "free time" in Mrs. Dixon's class. It had been nearly two weeks since any of the school's children had been allowed outside, as extremely low temperatures and heavy precipitation had been hanging over the immediate area. With about 10 minutes of time left in Mrs. Dixon's instruction, after noting the clearing skies, she suddenly announced "let's go outside!" There was a rush to the outside door of Mrs.

Dixon's room. One boy, on his way out, picked up a football and sprinted away, with a trail of boys in tow. Jimmy, obviously interested in joining the action, followed the boys to the "playing field." The "game" actually consisted of a throwing and catching exercise, where groups of two-to-three white boys stood about 30 feet apart and tossed the ball back-and-forth. Jimmy, it soon became apparent, was not welcome. It is unclear whether this exclusion was communicated to him verbally, but there was little doubt he had been excluded. He appeared (see Appendix A, Photograph #1) to be "unaccepted" as he stood within the confines of the game, and this researcher empathized with what appeared to be a distraught, confused child: "I felt really sorry for Jimmy. He really looked like he was being excluded. He practically begged to be included--but he did this non-verbally."

Some time later, after administering the surveys to the entire seventh-grade class, it became apparent that some of the students considered their survey request to mean "answer the way you think you *should* feel, or the way you *should* think." Despite repeated admonitions to "please answer honestly," many appeared to question the confidentiality of their potential responses, or become worried that some of their peers might somehow learn of their responses. Thus, a large proportion of the results "followed along the party line," with students answering in ways that would not reveal incriminating information. Jimmy's response, at least in part, could be held up to that standard and would no doubt be considered "socially correct." His responses, like others, are nonetheless revealing when examined closely. In regard to the question "Explain how important it is for you to be a part of a 'group of friends' here at this school," Jimmy answered "to feel like your [sic] apart [sic] of some thing [sic]." While the response did not appear to answer the question as it was asked, there were strong indications that Jimmy desired closer relations with the children in his class--and that at least some of the children refused to accommodate him into their social circle.

Anthony, with a few exceptions, appeared to be comfortable around all of his classmates during the course of this study, although he tended to sit alongside Todd (a

white boy) when possible. Like Kesha, Anthony participated in class discussions regularly and gave the impression that he valued learning. While his preference for company with the other minorities was not evident initially, his choices became clear as the study progressed. Considering the number of occurrences when students were observed in socially relevant situations, a disproportionate amount of Anthony's time was spent in the company of other minorities (mainly Jimmy, as shown in Appendix A, Photograph #7). There were occurrences, however, when Anthony preferred to be alone with his thoughts (see Appendix A, Photograph #2) over socialization with any of his peers.

Mrs. Jones pointed out that until the year of this study, Anthony had been known as a "non-conformist" who associated only with other African-Americans at the school, but that now "He's very involved with the others. He doesn't seem to feel threatened by anyone. He's completely turned-around from that type of behavior." It is difficult to determine the exact meanings Anthony ascribes to his peer group, but his survey responses were valuable in the determination of his thoughts about acceptance. In response to the question "Explain how important it is for you to be a part of a 'group of friends' here at this school" Anthony replied "It is not important to me to be in a 'group.' If they don't like me for who I am I don't care." In reply to "Do you feel, overall, that you are *accepted* by your classmates?" Anthony stated: "Yes, my classmates except [sic] me because I am different from them." While it remains unclear why Anthony's friends would accept him *because* he was different, it appears clear that Anthony did not "follow the party line" in responding to the questions. It appears likely that Anthony still seeks the company of those who do not represent the "normal" race or way of life, but that he also is making considerable progress assimilating into the environment he has had to endure since he first attended the school seven years ago.

Randy's absence (due to illness) on the day the survey was administered was unfortunate. He nonetheless represents the ideal form of minority-acceptance that was observed throughout this study, and it appears likely that his responses to such a survey

would be positive, unless they conformed to the "party line" observed in so many others survey results. From the beginning of this research effort, Randy was observed as a "friend to everyone" and a studious, hardworking student. Early in the study, after Mrs. Jones had called for the class to "divide into groups and complete this test review sheet," Randy was observed in a group of 6-7 white boys completing the assignment. Not only was Randy a part of this group, he appeared to be actively involved in the discussion--and seemed to "take control" at various points in the discussion. As Mrs. Jones would relate at a later date, "He really pushes himself. His father is Iranian...and he [the father] knows that Randy will have to excel even farther than the rest of the kids in order to stay with them..." Observations of Randy's classroom behavior helped to confirm this dedication to excellence (see Appendix A, Photograph #4, where he appears to be the most attentive).

While Randy tended to prefer seating arrangements with Bill (a white boy), he, more than any other minority, appeared to "play the field" in regard to seating partners and those he chose to socialize with at any given time. Indeed, Randy chose to sit with Jimmy on one occasion in Mrs. Nelson' room, and he was part of the "minority cluster" observed in the lunchroom one day (described below), but on every other occasion he sat with the various boys and girls who were white.

About midway through the study, this researcher had the opportunity to observe members of the seventh-grade class in the lunchroom of the school. In addition, these circumstances afforded brief (but informative) interviews with Mrs. Nelson, Mrs. Dixon, and, once again, Mrs. Jones. Shortly after the lunch period began, it was observed that Holly and Kesha sat side-by-side at a table that was somewhat removed from the other students. Open seats existed on either side of the girls, and they conversed only among themselves as they ate. Not very far away, the three minority boys: Anthony, Randy and Jimmy, sat side-by-side at a table, and were obviously enjoying themselves. I pointed the arrangement out to Mrs. Nelson, and asked if the scene was a typical lunchroom occurance. "I've never seen those three together like that," said Mrs. Nelson. This must

be just a coincidence. I might expect Anthony and Randy to be sitting together, but Jimmy sitting with them seems curious."

Another such "coincidence" occurred some time later in Mrs. Jones' classroom. After entering the setting and determining the names of those students who were "paired" (by choice) with the minority students, this researcher found it interesting that none of the minority students had ever been paired with the children they were joined with at that moment. As a university practicum student took over the class and began facilitating an independent practice activity, this researcher conferred with Mrs. Jones in regard to the unusual seating arrangement. Her reply was an accurate description of the unusual nature of the hour's events:

> This is really odd. I've *never* seen Kesha sitting with Jay [a white boy]." For that matter, I don't believe I've *ever* seen Holly and Allison [a white girl] seated together, or Randy and Kelly [a white boy]!" I *know* Anthony and Jennifer [a white girl] are not very acquainted, and Jimmy and Case [a white boy] are not friends. This is very strange, and I don't know what to think about it!

Despite the fact that these occurrences were present during the time of this study, it must be stressed that in the majority of cases, the minority students tended to "lean on" the other minorities. Just as the three minority boys were "never seen together like that" in the lunchroom, the atypical pairings observed in Mrs. Jones' room might very well represent a "typical" phenomenon. In other words, adolescents are not always "predictable" regardless of the factors of race, social standing, gender and other variables. It might be expected that after a certain period of time, social situations might change to conditions that are difficult to explain, after which the normal socialization patterns reemerge. The survey results are another example of this idea. While the focus of this study was narrowed quite early to encompass the meanings the minority students possessed in regard to their social standing within their class, one could view the survey results of white boys and white girls and argue that these children have similar rejectionist

tendencies. For instance, a white boy's response, when presented with the question "Do you feel, overall, that you are *accepted* by your classmates? Why do you feel this way?" was "no, they don't want me around." Answering the same question, a white girl responded:

> No. I'm different than them. I'm the only one in 4-H and Girl Scouts. But if you think about it I'll come out better because they don't know how to do some things that I do. and [sic] they just don't like me I feel. It kind of Hurt [sic] a little because their [sic] accepted and they don't know how it feels to not be accepted.

One other white girl's response reflects the same theme: "No because I don't really get along with them because I'm diffrent [sic]."

Conclusion

The minority students in this study appear to have maintained a certain "distance" from their white peers, with a few exceptions. This is not to say that the minority students *initiated* this process, or that they *prefer this distance*. There are several indications (most notably with Jimmy, the Oriental boy), that the minorities themselves have attempted to integrate with their white classmates. There was no tendency on the part of the white students (at least not during the period of this study) to invite a minority student into a white social setting, nor was there an instance of "blooming friendships" between students of separate race.

The two females of the minority group, Holly and Kesha, were obviously detached from the seventh-grade "social scene" at the school. While there are distinct differences in personality between the two (Kesha appears somewhat extroverted and attempts integration with the white group, Holly appears introverted and makes no such attempt), they appear to be "leaning" on one another for social and emotional support. While it is quite obvious, according to survey responses and observations, that Kesha desires acceptance and inclusion from the "outside" group, it should not be assumed that Holly

desires less. It might very well be the "divorce incident" (with the loss of hair, recounted by Mrs. Jones) that has resulted in her timidity. What seems clear is that each of the girls is *not accepted into the group at-large*.

Jimmy, despite attempts to integrate with his white peers, has also failed to be included into the larger group. The fact that he was a "new" student (he had arrived at the school just a few months before) might be offered as an explanation, but it appears that his "differentness" is more to blame. The survey responses, (at least from the "excluded" student's perspective), give indication that "because I'm different" is just cause for non-acceptance. As the solitary seating choices of Jimmy suggest, he appeared ready to concede defeat in his effort to be included by the time this study concluded. Jimmy, it appears, was also *not accepted into the group at-large*.

Anthony and Randy, on the other hand, appear to have involved themselves with their white peers. While both had tendencies to group with other minority students, they related a degree of acceptance that their minority friends did not enjoy. Anthony, perhaps, has undergone the most transition in the last year in regard to white student relations, and Randy's demeanor suggests a long period of incorporation within the white social group. Anthony's survey response seems to indicate a high level of sensitivity in regard to his race, but he is obviously able to accept invitations to be included.

It should be stressed that several "unusual" situations occurred during the course of this study. The atypical seating arrangement observed during one of Mrs. Jones's classes and the clustering of all minorities during a lunch period are two such examples. Whether these instances were coincidental cannot be determined at the present time. It should also be noted that several white students, when responding to survey questions, made indications to the effect that "acceptance had eluded them" as well.

This study was limited by interviewing restrictions. It would have been helpful to interview both the minority and non-minority students for the purpose of determining the individual meanings each possessed regarding acceptance and non-acceptance. The

survey administered to these children was useful for understanding specific views, but probing questions during unstructured student interviews might have provided even more meaningful data. Another setback for the study was the "unavailability" of certain teachers, staff, and this researcher for extensive interviewing purposes. Mrs. Jones provided the most comprehensive verbal description, and while Mrs. Nelson and Mrs. Dixon also offered valuable information, it might have been beneficial to involve more of their insight and input.

Despite its limitations, this study appears to shed light on certain controversial issues. For instance, can "integrationists" find valuable ammunition in studies such as this? That is, do the exclusionary practices of white students toward minority students constitute a call for a "reemergence of desegregation?" Researchers who wish to examine this process in the future might also consider cross-grade factors; that is, does the acceptance of minorities into the mostly white environment vary with grade level? In addition, it would be helpful for future studies to address the teacher's role in race-related inclusion: does the teacher play a part in racial acceptance? Do non-white teachers play a similar part? Indeed, further inquiry into such questions is warranted. Perhaps the answers are not quite as difficult to determine than the attitudes we may have instilled into our children.

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